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SUBJECT: MANMOHAN SINGH A TRUE STATESMAN IN REACTING TO
SIKH RIOT REPORT

1. (SBU) Summary: Doing what no Indian leader in 20 years has been willing to do, Manmohan Singh apologized to the nation for government inaction during the 1984 anti-Sikh riots. The apology preempted BJP efforts to capitalize on the report, which named two high-profile Congress leaders as conspirators in the riots. Congress forced resignation of a government minister implicated in the report blunted BJP and Left party criticism and raised the question of whether Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi will be forced to step down if he is indicted by a similar report investigating the Gujarat riots. The belated acknowledgment of Government complicity in the 1984 riots has exposed raw nerves in the Sikh community, but will not lead to a return to separatist violence. The PM's singular act of political courage stands in exquisite contrast to the opportunism and hatred directed by senior GOI officials against Sikhs in 1984. The PM's act of statesmanship will raise his already strong reputation as a representative of the nation's highest Gandhian ideals. End Summary.

PM Singh Does the Impossible: Apologizes

2. (U) "I have no hesitation in apologizing to the Sikh community. I apologize not only to the Sikh community, but to the whole Indian nation because what took place in 1984 is the negation of the concept of nationhood enshrined in our Constitution." With those words, PM Singh -- himself a Sikh -- did what no other Indian leader has been capable of: apologizing for the government's involvement in 1984 riots following the assassination of Indira Gandhi by one of her Sikh bodyguards, which left thousands of Sikhs dead due to pogroms directed by Congress party office bearers.

The Nanavati Report Doles out Blame

3. (U) The Nanavati Commission Report, commissioned by the BJP government in 2000, was released to the public on August 8 and found the Congress government in power at the time of the riots responsible for not just allowing them to happen, but actively organizing the pogroms. The report also faulted the police for inaction during the riots and a failure to register cases in the months following the carnage. Minister for NRI Affairs Jagdish Tytler and Congress MP and Chairman of the Delhi Rural Development Board Sajjan Kumar, both MP's from Delhi at the time, were specifically identified as conspirators in the violence.

PM's Contrition Deflates BJP

4. (U) The speed with which Congress forced two of the party's senior leaders to step down and released an apology to the nation preempted BJP and Left Party criticism, leaving the opposition with little ammunition with which to attack the UPA. The Press quoted a senior BJP MP as saying, "The government has not only blunted the edge of our campaign, it has put a lid on it." Our interlocutors affirmed that the widespread positive reaction to the PM's statement makes it unlikely the opposition could capitalize on the release of the report for political gain.

Should Modi Be Worried?

5. (U) The swift action of the Congress leadership in sacrificing Tytler and Sajjan Kumar has raised questions about the fate of Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi if a similar commission investigating the 2002 Gujarat riots finds his government at fault. A BJP MP expressed concern in the press that his own party's strict demand for Tytler's removal has left the BJP with little room to maneuver if the Nanavati-Shah Report finds Modi or his administration complicit in the riots. The BJP is also worried how the PM's courageous act could play out in the upcoming elections in Bihar. Laloo Prasad, a Congress ally and power broker in Bihar, could use Tytler's resignation to stress that, unlike Congress, the BJP is unprepared to touch its leaders who were involved in communal violence. Nitish Kumar, who is running against Laloo for Chief Minister in Bihar on a ticket shared by the BJP, may be forced as a result to call for action against Modi. Such intra-party controversies could be

damaging to a BJP already in turmoil. However, our interlocutors have argued that the BJP is in such disarray, that the central decision makers do not have the power to force Modi to step down, and therefore he will remain at the helm of Gujarat. (Note: The Nanavati-Shah Report was commissioned in 2003 and has yet to be released. End Note.)

The Horror Returns in Nightmares

16. (SBU) The August 8 release of the report dredged up old nightmares among Sikhs who have always accused the Congress of covering up party leaders' incitement to murder Sikhs. Sikh contacts who lived through the turmoil in New Delhi affirmed that the mobs who targeted Sikh houses within mixed neighborhoods were clearly guided by electoral rolls or other government-supplied lists. One contact recounted to us his experience in Chandni Chowk district of Old Delhi, where the Sikh District Police Chief, who had effectively deployed his forces to suppress violence during the first day of rioting, was summarily relieved of command at 6:00 am the following morning. District police forces were then told to stand down, and the district erupted in arson of Sikh homes. Despite the widespread conviction that senior Congress leaders (including some currently in government) participated in the riots, our interlocutors believe that the wounds, while deep, are too old to provoke a return to violence and that a majority of Sikhs would appreciate the belated apology from the party they see as responsible.

Comment: Once Again a Statesman

17. (SBU) Prime Minister Singh has yet again shown that he is willing to place what is right for the country over political considerations. Recently, he defied the left-leaning elements of the UPA government by concluding a sweeping US-India joint statement. Now he has and apologized for one of the saddest and darkest moments in recent Indian history. In doing so, he opened himself to political attacks from all sides. The PM apology and forced resignation of a minister with long ties to the Gandhi family has surprised Indians who only expected the worst of their politicians. The PM's singular act of political courage will be long-remembered as a momentous -- almost Gandhian -- moment of moral clarity in India's long march to religious harmony.

BLAKE